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AUTHOR Morello, Joseph G.
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ABSTRACT

The University of Rhode Island, through the cooperation of its College of Business Administration and Department of Languages, has undertaken efforts to market its business language program. The target group consists of the incoming freshman class, all of whom must have completed 2 years of high school language study and do some college work in a foreign language or culture to satisfy general education degree requirements. Active recruitment to the business language program first targeted the freshman class of 1988-89. All students accepted in the business school were mailed a letter stating the case for the internationally trained business student, offering an experimental business French section, and requesting information about student interest. Many more students than expected expressed interest, with about two-thirds actually registering for the course. Half of those students have continued into a sixth-semester French course for business students corresponding to a composition and conversation course. Surprisingly and in contrast to previous experience, many say they would have continued in language study even without the business language courses. Offerings have been expanded to include German and Italian. Anecdotal and empirical evidence indicate that this simple recruiting approach is effective. (MSE)

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THE MARKETING OF THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Joseph G. Morello
Department of Languages
University of Rhode Island
Kingston, Rhode Island 02881

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Dr. Joseph G. Morello

THE MARKETING OF THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE PROGRAM

In recent years, the business/language program has become an increasingly more frequent offering in university curricula. The internal disputes among language faculty in particular concerning the academic value of such programs is largely in the past. The calls for such training emanating from both the private and public sector, the efforts of such bodies as the Paris Chamber of Commerce to certify learning in this field, the growing body of published material in the area of the teaching of business language and, finally, the efforts of the people responsible for this conference, have essentially put to rest the question of whether or not we should be involved with business/language instruction and program development. Having therefore created and certified the validity of such programs for our colleagues, the next problem is, how do we get the consuming public, i. e., our students, to take advantage of what we now have to offer. I would like to address this issue today in the context of the business/language program which has been developed at the University of Rhode Island through a cooperative effort of certain members of the College of Business Administration and the Department of Languages.

Since what I am going to talk about is meant as something very practical, something which you might be able to apply at

your own institution, it would be appropriate to spell out some of the particulars at URI which bear on the recruiting effort. You will be able to judge better whether or not, or to what extent, you can apply what we are doing at your home institution. It is important, I believe, to focus on two aspects of the situation at URI: the constitution of the potential recruiting crop, i. e., how we target the consumer group, and what the members of this group have been and will be obligated to do to satisfy the university's entrance and exit requirements in a foreign language.

URI is a small state supported university with an enrollment of about 10,000 undergraduates. Among the seven degree-granting colleges are the College of Arts and Science which houses the Language department and a College of Business Administration, currently the most difficult college to be admitted to due to overcrowding. Incoming freshmen are provisionally accepted into this college if they have graduated in the top one-third of their high school class and have a minimum of 560 in their SAT math. Those students who have requested the Business School but do not meet these requirements are placed on a waiting list. Following this formula, approximately 300 incoming students are accepted each year with another 150 placed on the waiting list. This approximately 450 students of the incoming freshman class constitute, then, the target group for our recruiting effort.

As to the second aspect, what students are obligated to do in terms of language study, the following situation applies at

URI. All students applying for admission to the university for whatever program are required to present two years of high school language study. To satisfy general education requirements for all degrees at the university, students must do some work in either a foreign language or a foreign culture, the choice depending on the student's degree program. Business students have the choice of satisfying this requirement by doing six credits in a language or by taking six credits in approved "culture" courses taught in English. This requirement is vital to the recruiting effort I will describe since incoming students can satisfy a general education requirement at the same time that they begin to work on the business/language program. I suspect that an institution which has no language requirement as part of its general education program would find it more difficult to recruit students into this program if the initial stage of language study were strictly elective work.

I would like now to take a look at the history of the business/language program at URI and describe the attempts at recruitment which had relatively little success. The original program was put in place in 1973. The program itself was nothing more than what students could already do on their own, i. e., do a major in a business field with a minor in a language. Efforts to attract students to the program consisted essentially of informing them through the advising system of the possibility of the major/minor combination. Quite often, however, this advise came too late to be of use. Since most students are not

officially accepted into the Business School before the end of their sophomore year, we found that even those who might have some interest in combining language study with their degree were, by this time, too far along on the road to graduation to complete any meaningful work in the language. The occasional highly motivated student who decided to do a fifth year in order to do more language work was rare indeed.

Fliers describing the program were also distributed to the business faculty, as well as to high school guidance counselors in the state. This effort to recruit was ineffective, perhaps because we relied on intermediaries who were not always kindly disposed to language study to carry the message to the consumer. It was not unusual to hear from business faculty and guidance counselors that this type of program was just an effort on the part of the language department to save itself in a time of dwindling enrollments. Business faculty often pointed to the demanding business curriculum as being too crowded to allow a student to do serious work in a language. I often heard stories from business students about some of their teachers who actively discouraged them from continuing with a language since, "it wasn't really necessary" in the modern business world. The people we were relying on, then, to get our message out were not always inclined to encourage students to avail themselves of what we were offering. It is not surprising, then, that the program had relatively few students in it for the first ten years or so of its existence.

A FIPSE grant in 1980 allowed us to create greater integration between the two disciplines and to give the program a more solid educational basis at a time when students were beginning to return to language study. Thanks to the grant, several members of the language department were able to acquire the necessary retraining to allow them to create and offer advanced business language courses. We also became a member of the Eastern Michigan consortium which offered the possiblity of post-graduate internships abroad for students completing the business/language program. Despite the improvements in the program, however, the number of students who elected to follow it remained small, and they tended to be language majors who were able to register for the necessary business courses in order to acquire a minor in business.

A look at the students who have taken the senior level Business French course the five times that it has been offered over the the past decade reveals that enrollment has never exceeded ten and has averaged seven students. Of those students, a little less than 50% have been true business French students as we had imagined them, i. e., students who would graduate with a B. S. in Business Administration and a minor in French, or ocassionally, the reverse, a B. A. in French with a business minor. The remaining students were usually straight French majors with no business background. Their motivation in taking the course was, at best, a desire to add a "practical" element to their resumes and, at worst, the desire to avoid having to take a

literature class as their only other option among the advanced courses that semester.

It finally became clear that if the business/language program were ever to realize its potential, we would have to become much more active in recruiting students for it. Above all, those of us most concerned with the program, both in the Language department and in the Business School, needed to speak as directly as possible to the potential clientele. And we needed to do this before they reached the university so that they could start to work immediately on what is a highly structured four year program. Our first recruitment effort was directed at the incoming class for the year 1988-89. In May of 1988, a letter co-signed by the Assistant Dean of the College of Business Administration and myself was sent to the 450 incoming students who had been accepted to the Business School or placed on the waiting list. In this letter, we stated the case, now well publicized through the media, for the internationally trained business student. We offered them a special section of French for business students which we explained would be run on an experimental basis and could eventually serve as a model for other language courses at URI. Accompanying the letter was a questionnaire which we requested that the students return whether or not they were interested in this particular course. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gauge the potential interest in combining business studies with languages other than French.

The response rate to this initial offer was a pleasant surprise. We had hoped to find a minimum of fifteen students for the special section of French in order to be able to justify teaching it to the university administration. Instead, forty-eight students replied expressing an interest in taking the course and in pursuing a dual degree in business and French. Our fears that we might not have enough students now turned into fears that we would need more than one section (since we could not staff more than one) to accomodate these students. These fears disappeared, however, when students actually registered for the course during Freshman orientation. Of the forty-eight who had replied to the letter, only twenty-eight eventually took the course. Our second recruiting effort for the current year saw a similar decline in the number of students who, in the comfort of their homes, decide that studying a language along with business would be a great idea and who then have second thoughts when it comes time to register for the language course. The first mailing also provided evidence that there was interest in combining business and other languages: thirty-one students returned the questionnaire expressing interest in studying Spanish, German or Italian as well. We had therefore received seventy-nine affirmative replies to the notion of combining business and language studies from the 450 students who had been contacted for a 19% "approval" rate.

In the Fall of 1988, the first special section of French for business students was taught with twenty-eight students in it.

As is inevitable, this group has been reduced by natural attrition. At the current time, a number of these students are in their fourth French course at URI, all of which have been designated as "French for business students". Having started at the intermediate level, this group is currently taking a course which corresponds to our sixth semester course, "Composition and Conversation". The total number in the class is now twenty. Of this number, thirteen are from the original recruitment group of twenty-eight; two have come directly into this course from high school through this past year's recruiting effort; the remainder, five, are students who switched into business in their sophomore year and whom we recruited from the regular sections of our intermediate program. Of the thirteen from the initial recruitment group, only eight "made" the Business School; four have decided that they wanted to continue with French in order to combine it with their new major and one student eventally decided to major in French. The results of our initial recruiting effort, then, is that we have created a pool of twenty students who will be taking junior level courses in French next year, thirteen of whom are planning to continue their studies in French and Business.

Based on the success of the first year effort, we expanded the offerings for the 1989-90 freshman class to French, German and Italian. A smaller recruiting pool, about 350 as opposed to the initial year's 450, produced commensurately smaller numbers of students responding to the offer. In French, a class of

twenty is currently taking its second course and, in German, there is a class of fourteen in their second semester. Unfortunately, the critical mass of fifteen students was not found for the Italian course. Once again, in the accompanying questionnaire, students showed a strong desire for a Spanish course but, to date, I have not been able to convince my colleagues in Spanish of the value of this program.

Earlier this semester, I decided to question the first recruitment group, now in the "Composition and Conversation" course, to determine whether or not our recruiting effort had been instrumental in their decision to combine business and langugage studies. I was astonished to find that virtually all the students--12/13 among the business students, 18/20 overall--said they would have continued with French even if the special sections for business students had not existed. My surprise was based on my sense that we rarely saw business students in the sixth semester course. To confirm this intuition, I reviewed rosters going back to 1983 and found that no "Composition and Conversation" course during those years had more than two business students in it and, in most instances, there was only one or none. I do not quite know what to make of the survey results except to conclude that they may have been skewed by the preface in which it was stated that the students' answers would help us determine the future of the program. Perhaps, in this context, they felt obliged to be very positive in their replies. I believe that a better judge of the success

of the recruiting program can be seen in a compelling statistic: the thirteen business students in this one section of "Composition and Conversation" is equal to the total number of business students, also thirteen, who have taken this course during the last seven years.

Seen in another light, this special section of French for business has doubled the number of students we normally have going on to junior level language, literature and civilization courses. These courses, which have been chronically underenrolled or dangerously close to university mninima, will undoubtedly find a new source of students in the business group. To give one concrete example, the introuduction to literature course which normally enrolls about fifteen students, could well double that number in Fall of 1990 according to an unofficial survey of the current sixth semester students. I would like to stress that this recruiting program, while aimed primarily at getting students into the business/language program, should have a real impact on enrollment in advanced level language and literature courses, an area which has been in decline in recent years.

The recruiting method I have described here is a relatively simple one which appears to have the capability of attracting students into the business/language program in respectable numbers. It is an inexpensive method, costing our university only the postage to mail out the recruitment letter. To this point, we have been able to accomodate the additional sections

necessary for the business students within the confines of our staffing budget. For anyone contemplating using a similar method, it should be pointed out that cooperation of the Business School, particularly at the administrative level, is extremely helpful, if not mandatory. For example, the simple fact that the letter we send to the incoming students is co-signed by the Assistant Dean of the Business School gives increased legitimacy to the program we are selling in the eyes of the students. Perhaps the one lesson which we learned most clearly is that we must address ourselves directly to the students if we want to sell the program. To conclude anecdotally, an administrator at the university told me that his son, who had been accepted into the business program for this year, received our letter this past May, read it, thought a second and than declared that he had never thought about continuing his language study and combining it with business, but that it was an excellent idea and he would do it. It might be interesting to contemplate how many students there are coming into business programs around the country who simply "never thought about" a language/business combination. It is our responability, perhaps, to go looking for them rather than waiting for them to come to us.